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A Writer of Relation[1]

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> 'Yes, child?'
> 'Did you really see a soucouyant?'
> 'Oh dear,' she said, still smiling. 'Whatever you think you want with some old nigger-story?'[3]

A monster to be imagined— Clever would be the person who knows what a soucouyant looks like. It is one of the mysteries of Caribbean story-telling. This *oraliture* emerged in the dark night of slave plantations. The original Caribbean story-teller only talks once night has fallen, when holding a wake for a deceased slave. The stories he will tell until daybreak aim to allow the slaves to better live their life. Here "living" is fighting against both an effective death and a symbolic death; the effective death of the man whose remains have brought us together; the symbolic death of all slaves induced by the near-ontological dehumanization inflicted by American-style slavery on its victims. The very first

1. The following text is the English translation of the introduction to the French pocket-book reprint of *Soucougnant* by David Chariandy. [Édition française originale: Éditions Zoé, 2012. Zoé Poche (97): 2020]. Please note the different English and French titles of the book: *Soucouyant* (in English); and *Soucougnant* (in French).
2. Translator's note: With thanks to Janice Flavien for her revisions and critical Caribbean eye.
3. Translator's note: All cited passages are copied from the original English: David Chariandy. *Soucouyant*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

teaching of the primordial story-teller was to make the slaves, young and old, understand that they should not expect help from anything or anyone; their only means of survival was their own resourcefulness. This is why, in Caribbean creole stories, there are no good princes or guardian angels, no good fairies or gentle beings. Our fantasy world is inhabited by monsters who have no mama or papa, each more fearsome than the next. They constitute an ecosystem of terror—not immoral, but amoral—equal in intensity to the one that reigned in the universe of the plantations. After a night spent listening to tales of this sort, children and old men reduced to slavery watched the sun rise, having been endowed with the skills to survive at all costs.

These creole monsters were numerous: *zombies, she-devils, dorlis, Bête-à-man-ibè, 3-legged horse, maman-dlo* … all as disturbing as the soucouyants themselves. Only, the story-tellers of old never provided details on the appearance of these infernal creatures. Two or three allusions *(…a creature… a ball of fire… sucks his blood… putting on its skin, syrup sounds and soft elastic snaps…*, etc.) would suffice to inflame imaginations. The absence of descriptions does not stifle the imagination of readers or listeners. On the contrary, *it unleashes it!* In a consciousness that is forced to live in imagination, nothing is more terrifying than a monster whose appearance one has fantasized drawing only on one's intimate fears. Thus, soucouyants amazed the memories of generations of Caribbean people even though no one knew what they might look like. In this beautiful work by David Chariandy, this narrative frame, typical of the Caribbean imaginary, has been respected. The narrator's mother, who "has become an old woman," has kept this amazement at the core of her memory, as both a foundational moment and as the centre from which radiates a whole set of remembrances. As her memory frays, from one failure to another, the soucouyant acquires a subtle narrative density, one that becomes clearer with the thickening of its mystery. This is beautiful art.

Metaspora – This old Caribbean woman in exile, whose memory travels on the ocean of a childhood terror (the original terror), speaks to the experience of exile that has been and continues to be shared by generations of Caribbean people. Caribbean civilization —born of the collisions between all continents, all civilizations, all cultures—has never stopped spreading to the shores of this world not only its music and dances, but literally its sons and daughters, forced to leave the confines of post-slavery islands in search of a bit of luck elsewhere. At the root of the Caribbean imaginary is this initial departure, this life lived far away that is expressed by the narrator's mother. An existence—fashioned between two countries, two languages, several histories, and worked also by the still-present flavours of a reality that is no longer there (…*rum, peppers, yams, cassava, sugar apples, taro, mangoes, medicinal plants, coconut bread, the smells of molasses and coffee*…)— that unfolds on an additional dimension.

That of a far-away country set on a vanishing line in a country-here, a childhood land carried as a source and horizon in a land-of-now, languages lost that persist in the new host language. The ebbs and flows between forgetting and remembrance, sudden amnesia and unexpected clairvoyance, sketch out a memory that comes and goes, that comes as it goes, and reflects a bulk of encounters or mixings and, in sum, this world diversity that is the primal matter of the entire Caribbean.

> She's become too sensitive, she tells herself. She's living the dream of countless people in her birthplace, stuck back there with the running sores of their histories.

But this exile did not merely engender a diaspora. The sons of a diaspora stay, in a matter of speaking, subject to the land of origin. They live its absence in pain and withdrawal, a kind of idealizing, even an essentializing that shapes their secret aspirations. They dream of one day returning. Their lives are somehow in parentheses as they wait to return. The narrator's mother sees the old home, but from the distance inflicted upon her by her childhood encounter with a soucouyant. The monster emerges for her as a prism that deforms as it sharpens, zooms out and zooms in, deconstructs as it zooms in, as would a residual terror. Thus, it derives not just from a diaspora, but rather from a *metaspora*. This notion, put forward by Joël des Rosiers, refers to a sort of rooted exile: sons and daughters of a far-away land, who have flourished, borne unexpected fruit, and for whom the desire to return is nothing more than a possible-impossible, without force or effect.

> The migration happened a long time ago, and it didn't involve circumstances that anyone had thought important to remember and pass on.

This metasporic reality—so useful for gaining an understanding of the dispersions and new solidarities in our contemporary world—is beautifully presented in this work by David Chariandy. Each day with the narrator's mother, each gesture, each dish, each bit of territory is multiplied by another, as though under enchantment, and augmented by an elsewhere that has become consubstantial with its very presence. Every moment is constituted by the presence and the ghost of another place in the world, an existential in-betweenness where one is cast adrift within oneself as well as far from oneself. It is little surprise that the other theme arising from the shock wave caused by the soucouyant would be memory:

> She tells me now that she doesn't understand that thing called memory. She doesn't understand its essence or dynamic, and why, especially, it never seems to abide by the rules of time or space or individual consciousness. She doesn't understand how a young woman, in the midst of some small crisis, can remember catastrophes that happened lifetimes ago and worlds away, remember and proclaim these catastrophes as if she herself had witnessed them first hand. She doesn't understand that at all, or else how the very same young woman, offering only what she imagines to be a cruel joke, can in fact end up remembering a catastrophe that is yet to happen.

The narrator follows the decomposition of a memory at the centre of which is an old, legendary, almost mythical encounter with a soucouyant. She who "has become an old woman" saw the monster at some point in her childhood. The event has remained carved into her entire being. It becomes a cornerstone as memories fray and intertwine, and reality flows into an ocean of uncertainties. David Chariandy's grace is in having understood that the narrator's genealogical tree, his line of descent, is lost in migrations, straddles oceans, is accompanied by the unpredictable. His mother's "soucouyantian" lineage does not assign her to any one territory, but rather opens up a whole range of places: the "territory" is part of the imaginary of a single origin and is enclosing. The "place" is multi-trans-cultural from the outset and is open. This is why the spectre of the soucouyant had to remain mysterious. What we are told about it blends several monsters in our oral literature (*the sheddable skin of she-devils, the mirror of maman-dlo*…) like a truly undefinable geography of enchanted terror:

> 'It happen …' she begins. 'It happen one fore-day morning when the sun just a stain on the sky. When the moon not under as yet. Me, I was a young girl running from home. Running 'pon paths so old that none could remember they origin. My ankle paint cool, cool by the wet grasses. I run and stumble into a clearing with an old mango knotting up the sky with it branch. The fallen fruit upon the ground. They skin all slick and black. The buzz of drunken insect.…'
> 'You saw a soucouyant, Mother.'
> 'Child?' she shouts, 'Is I telling this story or you?'
> 'Sorry, Mother.' She sucks her teeth loudly and cuts her eye once more at me.

The monster prowls through the pages, entwines itself in the lines; it structures without immobilizing, invades without showing itself. We wait for it to take shape, but it remains in its mythological over-there, endlessly revived by a race where the ankles of the child (like those of the old woman) are "painted cool." Every time the monster is evoked, details spread out to the limits of unreality and invest it with the all-powerfulness of an elsewhere glowing in the very heart of the memory-of-here:

> Something brilliant passed overhead and afterwards a silence like glass. This was when she noticed the creature. It was using, as a mirror, some water that had collected in a rusted oil drum. It was putting on its skin, syrup sounds and soft elastic snaps. It was gloving on its fingers when it rolled its eyes towards her. She didn't run, not at first. Even though the creature smiled and beckoned her to horrors. Even though the world wheeled about and everything became unreal, the sky shimmering like a mirage of blue.

The memory engendered by the metaspora—a memory of living-in-the-world between several territories, several languages, several histories—is a light one. It becomes increasingly ethereal as it unravels. It does not anchor, it diffuses. It does not constrain or lead back, it liberates. This is the legend of an entire life that David Chariandy narrates with inimitable artfulness; the end of an existence where memory becomes the unfathomable substance of living-despite-everything. The legend is embedded in the very heart of the person, forcing memory to be inherently open, like a galaxy that shapes and reshapes itself around a black hole: a remembrance that is fixed in terror and secret in its fantasy. We will never know what a soucouyant looks like, but our fear of the monster will remain intact. It appears to loom unexpectedly in the harsh, implacable and rapacious accounting of an old neighbour. She was believed to be selfless, a friend, but here she is, ruthless:

> 'What…?!'
> She leaves to fetch a notebook from her bedroom. She shows me the math. It's long and complex and my mind is still grappling with this unexpected reaction, but the subtotals are clear enough. 'In-home care at standard wages for 254 weeks.' […]
> 'Yes, she was my friend. She was my friend long before you was a small nothing swimming around in some man's stupid thing, so don't you remind me she was my friend. That not

> at all the point. You check the math yourself. Is all right and proper.'

So, it matters not what a soucouyant looks like. It is there when terror erupts, when pain strikes like lightening. It can then take any form, from the most familiar to the most foreign, and persist just beyond form. The child with the enchanted ankles had encountered it in its worst form, one of those terrible irruptions that ground an entire life in a bedrock of something that is unthinkable, impossible to overcome, impractical, and nourishes the disillusionment of youth and the lucid enchantments of our final years:

> 'She … she saw a soucouyant.'
> 'A what?'
> 'Not literally,' I explain. 'At least I don't think so. I mean, it's not really about a soucouyant. It's about an accident. It's about what happened in her birthplace during World War II. It's a way of telling without really telling, you see, and so you don't really have to know what a soucouyant is. Well, I guess you do, sort of. What I mean is, I'm not an expert on any of that sort of stuff. I was born here, you see. Not exactly here, of course. In a hospital farther west. But here, as in this land.'

David Chariandy is to be saluted. He has understood that the Caribbean is like a soucouyant—impossible to describe, impossible to define, it inhabits people without owning them, diffracts people and memories, and opens all origins to the shared spaces of the universe of possibilities. In presenting this moving diversity of the world that was celebrated by Édouard Glissant, Chariandy is a writer of relation. This is beautiful art, *twa fwa bel*.[4]

4. Translator's note: In several parts of the Caribbean the Creole phrase *twa fwa bel kont* (thrice beautiful story) is an audience response to a storyteller's introduction.